

Chinese–German Relations and the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the effect of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 on Chinese–German relations. American–German relations were considered as the most important variable impacting relations between Beijing and Berlin. A methodological media content analysis, using context coding, was used to arrive at findings and discussion. An unstructured interview

with an expert on media studies confirmed essentially the findings of the media content analysis. An integrated literature review on the American–German conflict indicated a contribution of the Crisis’s long-term effects to an essential, economic weakening of Germany in the years to come. Another Trump administration could deliver this outcome. Ultimately, the strategic partnership between China and Germany could end. German interaction with Beijing would politically be aligned with American interests. Control over Germany, Europe, the West, and world domination could be delivered to the United States. China and Russia would probably remain independent.

Keywords: *China, Germany, Taiwan, America, Donald Trump*

1. Introduction

The purpose of the study was to analyze the impact of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 on the development of Chinese–German political relations. The bilateral relations between the two powers had already been stressed as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian War since 2022. As Russia’s political partner, Beijing had indirectly, and to some extent, been associated with Russia’s actions. The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis led to a further decline of Chinese–German relations: the German government warned Beijing of severe consequences, should the military component of the Crisis escalate (*Deutsche Welle*, 5th August 2022). As the most important intervening variable affecting those relations, American–German political relations also had to be studied. Past, current, and potential development trends were examined – using political, historical, economic and media perspectives. I accounted for the nature of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 as an important indicator for a potential military escalation between a Western camp, including Germany, on the one side and an emerging Eastern bloc

on the other side, including China and Russia. While the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 would not lead directly to a military escalation, it possesses the potential to foreshadow such an escalation. The term “Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis” was coined for a series of Chinese military exercises in August 2022, nearby Taiwan. Delury, Haggard and Lee (2022: 13) suggested the term, as it represented a consensus amongst several academicians who had investigated the Crisis. Anand (2022), Twomey (2022) and McKinney and Harris (2022) also supported the use of the term for the August 2022 military exercises. These military drills continued in April 2023, what allowed framing the resumed naval exercises as an element of a long-lasting crisis. Also, the overall temporal scope of all military exercises justified even more the use of the term “Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis”.

After Nancy Pelosi, high-ranked United States (US) politician and Speaker of the House, had landed in Taiwan on 1st August 2022, Beijing conducted several military exercises around the island of Taiwan: lasting from 4th August until 15th August 2022. The communist Chinese government considered the democratically ruled island as a separatist part of China. During the exercises, four Chinese missiles flew over Taiwan (Delury, Haggard and Lee, 2022: 8). Beijing also imposed limited economic sanctions against Taipei (Anand: 2022) and blocked the island of Taiwan. Electronic displays in Taipei spread false information about the impact of a Chinese attack that never happened. The fake news was interpreted as the result of Chinese cyber warfare – and an indicator of what Beijing might be capable of in the case of a potential future attack (Lin, 2022: 27-28). Also, many Taiwanese doubted that they would receive sufficient US military support in the hour of need. The Crisis turned out to be ongoing beyond the initial time period in August 2022, as additional military exercises took place from 8th April until 10th April, 2023. Such a continuation of the original

Crisis in form of extended military drills had already been anticipated in 2022 (Delury, Haggard and Lee, 2022: 12-13). Already as of 2022, the Crisis was perceived as the most severe crisis in the Taiwan Strait since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis ended in 1996 (*ibid.*: 8). The Crisis in 2022 and 2023 demonstrated that Beijing would not be willing to accept if the island of Taiwan would formally declare its independence.

The effects of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis could be long-lasting. While Anand (2022) believed that the risk of open war was not imminent, not aligning with the official narrative spread by the US military, Ferguson (2022) contradicted. The historian drew a parallel to the preface of the military confrontation between the United States and Japan in the Pacific theatre of the Second World War. US sanctions 1939 until 1941 triggered Tokyo's attack on Pearl Harbour (Ferguson, 2022). Now, the US had imposed severe sanctions to cut Beijing from accessing semiconductor chips: which China urgently needed for its technological and economic growth. Taiwan was an essential semiconductor producer (*ibid.*). By obtaining control of Taiwan, Beijing could access the needed semiconductors directly. Also, with the Chinese economic growth slowing down, China needed a success in terms of foreign policy. Xi Jinping had already declared that the unification with Taiwan was one of his goals (Anand, 2022). US-Chinese tensions had seriously increased under Trump's presidency. It was Trump, who had started a trade war with China, and who had changed and upgraded US relations to Taiwan (*ibid.*), making Nancy Pelosi's visit in August 2022 possible. Should Trump be reelected as US president in 2024, a military escalation in the Taiwan Strait appeared to be more likely.

Trump could likely become next US president in the 2024 US Presidential elections despite facing legal persecution on several accounts as of 2023. Even if Trump would be successfully indicted based on at least one charge, he would still be allowed to run for the

White House (*Politico*, 6th April 2023). As of 2023 he will likely be the nominee for the Republican Party (Enten, 2023). Additionally, his popularity exceeds the popularity of his Democratic opponent, US president Joe Biden (*The Hill*, 17th February 2023). In case of a likely re-election as US president, Trump would probably even in case of a successful indictment be allowed to reside in the White House and could pardon himself for past legal trespassing (*Politico*, 6th April 2023).

As Germany was part of America's alliance system, future military escalations around Taiwan may trigger an irreversible decline in Chinese–German relations (*Deutsche Welle*, 5th August 2022). The new German government coalition with the Greens party, in power since 2021, emphasised political values as more important than economic ones (Oxford Analytica, 2022a: 4). Increased economic collaboration between China and the European Union, and further Chinese access to German technology, could be significantly hindered (Oxford Analytica, 2022b: 11). As economic cooperation was at the core of political relations between Beijing and Berlin, political spillover effects were to be expected as well (Ehret, 2019: 3). Due to the potentially ongoing nature of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and in 2023, further research was needed to understand all consequences in the study context in full scope (Delury, Haggard and Lee, 2022: 13). The development of bilateral relations between both Eurasian nations would also strongly be influenced by American–German political relations as most important factor (Ehret, 2019: 14-15).

Previous literature focusing on American–German relations, with a special focus on the time of Donald Trump's presidency (Aunesluoma, 2020: 14; Felbermayr, 2018: 260; Kanat, 2018: 10-11; Mahmood and Cheema, 2018: 17-18), ignored to a large extent scope and real nature of above relations – and the existing conflict between both Western powers: arriving at insufficient explanations (Ehret, 2019: 7). Bilateral

relations between both nations were stressed because both competed for the position of leadership of the Western world. Donald Trump's presidency was especially worth studying, as these tensions surfaced in a harsher way, than during previous presidencies (Brattberg, 2020) – because Trump, a provocateur, and an outsider to the political establishment, advocated perceived US positions more aggressively and openly. One important issue was the competitiveness of the German industry – according to Trump enabled by a devalued Euro: which led Trump to threaten the EU with a trade war (*Asia News Monitor*, 7th February 2017; *Asia News Monitor*, 4th November 2020). Further issues were Trump's concerns of Germany not contributing enough to NATO's budget (Kanat, 2018: 10-11) – and Trump's fear of a German-Russian energy alliance (Stent, 2019: 97-123). American–German relations were examined also during the time of the Biden administration (from 2021 onwards) to discover continuities and discrepancies, when comparing to the time of the Trump administration.

Study research objectives were to arrive at a better understanding of the following aspects: How would the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, and its aftermath, impact American–German relations? How would American–German relations affect Chinese–German relations? How would the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, and its aftermath, affect if the partnership between America and Germany would remain politically more important than the one between China and Germany?

Studying Trump's presidency in the above context was especially helpful for a better understanding: as many underlying problems in the US–German relations surfaced. The outcome of the American–German conflict possessed the potential to decide whether the US would remain the dominant world power – or if this status would be passed on to the aspiring People's Republic of China. Germany functioned as an enabler:

both for China’s rise to power and for America to preserve its status. Moreover, the relations between China and Germany possessed the potential to decisively influence the political map of Eurasia. The study was therefore significant.

Research assumptions were that the US would remain the dominant world power – but only within limitations. The American–German conflict would reach its points of resolution in the next years to come. The conflict would end with a significant weakening of Germany’s political and economic position – Germany would be irreversibly tied to US foreign policy. Germany’s ties with the US would remain stronger than Berlin’s connection with China. The strategic partnership between China and Germany would probably not last. Economic collaboration between both Eurasian powers would be weakened, even against both nations’ vital interests.

2. Integrated Literature Review: Study Context and Background

The researched keywords on different academic online platforms used for literature review on American–German Relations, in the build-up to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, were “American”, “German” and “relation” for publications starting from 2016 onwards. Examining American–German political relations during the time of the Trump administration (2017–2021) and Biden administration (since 2021) mattered, as it could help to better understand potential developments to come after 2024. In this regard, especially the Trump era was significant, as Trump could likely be re-elected as US president in 2024. The researched keywords on different academic online platforms used for literature review on Chinese–German relations, in the build-up to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, were “China”, “German” and “relation” for publications starting from 2016

onwards. Studying Chinese–German political relations during the time of Trump’s reign mattered especially: Trump had essentially prepared the China course of the Biden administration – which contributed to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023.

2.1. American–German Relations (2017–2023) in the Build-up to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023

It was Donald Trump who had triggered a trade war between America and China (Anand, 2022). Also, his administration had reevaluated and improved relations with Taiwan. Taiwanese citizens had shown appreciation by mostly supporting Trump over Biden in the US Presidential elections in 2020 (*NPR*, 21st October 2020). Without Trump’s strong stance against China, Pelosi’s Taiwan visit in August 2022 would probably not have happened. Trump had therefore prepared essential elements of the Biden administration’s China course. In the likely event of Trump’s return to the White House, because of the 2024 US Presidential elections, Trump’s anti-Chinese approach could be strengthened. Academicians agreed that the US–German political alliance deteriorated dramatically during the Trump presidency. During this time, ties between the US and Germany likely hit their lowest point since World War II (Brattberg, 2020). Of the EU nations, Germany was Trump’s most popular country to criticise (Mahmood and Cheema, 2018: 7). In 2017, Trump said that he had the same faith in Merkel as he had in Russia’s Vladimir Putin: an opponent of the US (Ikkenberry, 2017: 6). Trump blamed Berlin of attempting to create political and cultural dominance over Europe through means of the EU (Ivanov, 2019). Trump warned the EU with a trade war, citing aluminum and steel as targets, as well as the German automobile sector (*Asia News Monitor*, 4th November 2020): as Germany was exploiting the EU to harm America on trade, according to the real estate mogul in the White House

(Ikkenberry, 2017: 4). Trump blamed Merkel of taking advantage of a devalued Euro to gain a competitive edge for Germany's export-driven economy (*Asia News Monitor*, 7th February 2017). Furthermore, Trump saw Berlin as an untrustworthy ally that would work against American interests (*Financial Times*, 27th April 2018). He criticised Germany for not contributing enough money to NATO's budget (Kanat, 2018: 10). The EU, Trump believed, was damaging to American interests, just to a lesser extent than China (Felbermayr, 2018: 257). One must keep in mind that Germany had been named one of America's best allies by the preceding Obama administration (*Financial Times*, 27th April 2018) – close collaboration had continued despite existing German suspicions caused by the NSA surveillance of former chancellor Angela Merkel's mobile phone (Larres and Wittlinger, 2020: 127). Trump's level of criticism set therefore a new tone in the post-World War II bilateral relations. But Larres and Wittlinger (2020: 43) admitted that Germany had in the late 20th century turned into an economic competitor of the US.

According to academic literature, Trump's political aversion for Germany was reciprocal. A poll performed by the German organization Atlantik-Brücke revealed that 85 per cent of all respondents rated bilateral ties as low to extremely poor (*Asia News Monitor*, 20th August 2019). German statesmen have already begun comparing China's Communist Party with Trump's government (*Asia News Monitor*, 28th November 2019). Heiko Maas, Germany's former foreign minister, warned that trans-Atlantic relations might be irreversibly harmed (*Asia News Monitor*, 4th November 2020). Trump's designation of the EU as the "Fourth Reich" led to Germany's strongest open rejection of US foreign policy since World War II (Ivanov, 2019). Germany had become Europe's geo-economic center (Fröhlich, 2017). Merkel had been designated as the new leader of the West by the globalist movement in

the West, including America (Larres and Wittlinger, 2020: 95). The Western-based globalist movement advocated international power projection of Western political leaders and their corporate allies beyond the borders of traditional nation states (Nye, 2004: 33). In the sectors of military and security, Germany and France have begun to work together more closely (Ivanov, 2019). Germany would be able to improve its situation by aligning with France's intelligence, UN security, and military potentials (Lehne and Grabbe, 2017). In 2017, French president Emmanuel Macron proposed Merkel the establishment of an EU Army (Aunesluoma, 2020: 14): providing security also against a future US threat (Ehret, 2019: 7). *Der Spiegel*, a prestigious German publication, advocated a political-economic EU strategy to defend from Trump (Ikkenberry, 2017: 6). Fröhlich (2017) felt that ties between the United States and Germany would survive Trump's presidency. However, most academics believed that the bilateral ties had deteriorated.

The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, based on a 2015 deal, connecting the Russian Ust-Luga and the German Greifswald, was a particular source of anxiety for Trump (Stent, 2019: 97-123). Due to domestic compromises and pressure, and despite having personal sympathy for Russia's Vladimir Putin, Trump backed sanctions against the project: which was perceived as a threat to US energy and business interests (Larres and Wittlinger, 2020: 67). Nord Stream 2 would, like the first Nord Stream pipeline, create a direct connection between both European nations. Already in 2017, the US Congress backed penalties on Nord Stream 2 (Naumescu, 2017: 84). In 2018, Trump accused Germany of turning into a Russian pawn (Stent, 2019: 97-123). He warned of penalties for supposedly jeopardising Europe's energy security (Aunesluoma, 2020: 14). Pepe Escobar (2021), interpreting Trump's fears, believed that Nord Stream 2 would give Germany control over European energy provision, more influence over the EU, and

restore complete German autonomy. Also, Nord Stream 2 may serve as the foundation for a tight German-Russian partnership. By extension, a Chinese–Russian–German coalition could end America’s hegemony (Escobar, 2021). Escobar’s views could be regarded as true, despite being far-reaching.

The two US scholars Daniel Quinn Mills and Steven Rosefielde released a book on America’s foreign policy and Trump in 2016. The book provided readers with insight into the dangerous mindset of Trump and his followers. Yet, the interpretative usefulness of the book is limited. According to the writers, Germany’s rebirth as a power would be as important to America as China’s and Russia’s ascent. Germany was viewed as a long-term adversary and priority, with the potential to defeat America. Mills and Rosefielde (2016: 68) regarded the Central European country as one of four strategic powers posing a threat to the US and blamed Germany for being cunning. They believed that Germany’s ascension would occur during the following two decades – or about until 2036, counting from the book release date (*ibid.*: 148).

Germany, according to Mills and Rosefielde (2016: 86), was building its independence from Washington while exerting dominance over the EU. Since 1945, Berlin would not have possessed an influence like this. Germany had pushed its authority eastwards, perhaps involving the US in a clash with Russia. Currently, the Western world would be divided into two camps: one containing the US and the United Kingdom (UK), and the other containing the EU under Germany’s lead. Germany’s export competitiveness would be aided by the depreciation of the Euro (*ibid.*: 141). Mills and Rosefielde (2016: 145) defined Germany’s EU as a non-democratically legitimised political institution: indicating that use of force may be justified because America had previously attacked non-democratic countries. The subtext of the preceding sentence allowed a hazardous interpretation, as aggression

was indicated and justified in an indirect manner. Worse, the justifications that were being utilised were faulty. To begin with, NATO's eastward expansion against Russia supported American intentions more than German interests. Both experts blamed Berlin for pushing the US into a conflict with Moscow. But it was the US that was pushing Germany into a conflict with Russia. The Ukrainian colour revolution, which removed Kyiv from the Russian sphere of influence, was supported by Washington (Hahn, 2018: 327). The objective had been laid out decades ago by former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski in *The Grand Chessboard*: to limit Russia into not being much more than a "gateway to Asia" (Brzezinski, 1997: 52) – which eventually also contributed to the 2014 Russo–Ukrainian War and to Russia's aggression against neighboring Ukraine in 2022. Not the United States, but Berlin was affected by East European instability.

Germany's control over the European Union and the Euro's role were also misrepresented. The Euro was not in Germany's best interest, despite its benefits for Germany's export-oriented industry. For their backing of a German reunification in 1989/90, the French requested from the Germans a unified European currency (*SPIEGEL International*, 30th September 2010). Germans exchanged their stable D-Mark for a new currency shared by nations with a history of fiscal instability. Germany guaranteed from 2009 onwards a substantial portion of the debt of South European nations: to resolve the European debt dilemma (Degner and Leuffen, 2019: 96). In a worst-case situation, if too many European countries would need to be bailed out simultaneously, the European dream may end up costing Berlin hundreds of billions of Euros. A future European transfer and fiscal union was also considered – with weaker nations having practically direct access to federal German financial reserves (Howarth and Schild, 2021: 219-221). German sacrifices for the EU were explained by Simon Losch's (2017: 368-387)

definition of current German identity: Germans wanted to expiate for their perceived historical guilt. Because the previous notion of national identity carried a negative association for many Germans (*ibid.*), affiliation with the European Union had largely supplanted it. France was the primary benefactor of the Euro: both in terms of possible future transfer and current financial debt agreements. In America's interest and following Brzeziński's intended meaning, France turned into the nation to counterbalance Berlin's dominance. The statements of Mills and Rosefielde did not only present dangerously twisted facts, but they also aligned with anti-German propaganda reaching back to the time before 1945. The academically dubious remarks must be taken into account since they might serve as a foreign policy template for a potential future American administration: possibly even another Trump administration. After the German federal elections in September 2021, the German Green Party joined a governing coalition, taking stronger postures towards Russia (Lees, 2021: 7), which benefitted Washington's intentions. Following past trends, a hypothetical Trump government in the White House may wreak havoc on American–German ties on political, economic, and security levels. Such measures could be precipitated by a growing economic crisis. The possibility for conflict between the two ostensibly allied trans-Atlantic nations existed because of structural factors that previous studies had just scratched the surface of. The conflict potential derived from America's and Germany's substantial national interests.

Under the Biden administration (from 2021 onwards), the relations between Washington and Berlin began to become warmer. Yet, animosities with regards to the Russian–German pipeline project Nord Stream 2 remained (de Jong, 2022: 1). Acting against the gas pipeline on the ground of the Baltic Sea was one of the few continuities between the Democratic and the preceding Republican administration in the White

House. The Biden administration insisted that Germany should give up on this project, as it would otherwise become too dependent on Russia's energy supply (*ibid.*: 12). Russia's 2022 invasion of the Ukraine caused a fundamental change for American–German relations. The Western camp was from then on united under American leadership, including Germany. Mills and Rosefielde's (2016: 68) concern about Germany being a threat to US interests seemed to be unfounded. Germany agreed on far-reaching sanctions against Russia, including the withdrawal from the Nord Stream 2 project, which the Merkel administration had previously defended against all odds (Nelson, 2022: 50-51). But anti-Russian sanctions could cost Germany dearly: skyrocketing oil and gas prices, as a result of giving up on cheap Russian resources, could mean that the German economy and the living standards of private citizens would be significantly affected. Germany could face the largest decline in welfare since 1945 (*Financial Times*, 21st April 2022). The US–German alignment was therefore happening at Germany's expense. A massive economic decline of Germany could also mean that Berlin could reconsider its political position in the future: what might in effect lead to resurfacing, open tensions between Washington and Berlin.

Four detonations seriously damaged the two Nord Stream pipelines on 26th September 2022. Three gas pipeline strings were destroyed, only one string belonging to the non-certified Nord Stream 2 pipeline survived. The explosions were interpreted as a nation state's deliberate acts of destruction (*BBC News*, 28th September 2022; *Télévision Française 1*, 3rd October 2022). In effect, the attack against the Nord Stream pipelines would be the most severe 21st century terrorist attack: perpetrated against the countries of Russia and Germany. Berlin even accused Moscow for having blown up its co-owned, critical energy infrastructure costing billions of Euros (Bloomberg, 30th September 2022). Furthermore, Putin could after the attack not use the pipelines as

tools of pressuring the European Union anymore. In response, the Russians hinted at an American attack (*Al Mayadeen*, 1st October 2022): as the explosions happened near a Danish island, used as training site for US amphibian operations, and in NATO-surveilled areas. Moreover, the USS Kearsarge was nearby the site of the assumed attacks until about a week before it took place (*Télévision Française 1*, 3rd October 2022). Plus, US president Biden had in February 2022 openly declared that the US government would be capable of ending the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (*The Local*, 28th September 2022). If Moscow's accusations against the US were correct, Washington would have militarily attacked its own ally Germany – what would constitute the most serious turning point in binational relations after the Second World War. Swedish authorities started an investigation into the supposed attack, but ultimately decided not to share information publicly, citing national security as reason (Reuters, 15th October 2022).

Germany now strongly relied on extremely high-priced Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from America. The situation Germany was in had become so severe, that huge German corporations contemplated about outsourcing production sites to America, citing lower energy prices. Notable businesses in this regard were BASF, Lufthansa, Siemens, and Volkswagen (*Handelsblatt*, 29th September 2022). A massive, and likely permanent, economic decline of Germany had begun. The Russians offered Berlin to receive gas through the one intact Nord Stream 2 string (*Deutsche Welle*, 12th October 2022). Should Berlin welcome the offer to secure its future, US–German tensions would probably become even more serious. In the aforementioned context, America's attention was mostly on German–Russian ties, as it had been throughout the 20th century. Control of Germany by the US may also potentially prevent China from becoming the world's leading power. In the above setting, further study is needed to better comprehend past,

current, and future development patterns of American–German relations. As Germany already seemed to become more dependent on Washington, such a dependency could in the aftermath of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 even increase.

2.2. Chinese–German Relations (2017–2023) in the Build-up to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023

Trump had essentially prepared the China course of the Biden administration - which contributed to the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023. In the case of Trump’s return to the White House after the US Presidential elections in 2024, and in the aftermath of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis, Chinese–German relations could reach a new and even permanent low. During his first term in office, the Trump administration took already more aggressive stances against Beijing – and Germany’s relations to China began finally to worsen. Yet, most political scholars agreed that Trump’s presidency (2017–2021) forced both China and Germany initially into a mode of closer cooperation. The White House used during Trump’s reign a clearly hostile tone. A change from a unipolar to a multipolar world order was happening from the perspectives of both China and Germany (Ehret, 2019: 3). The Eurasian partners saw the cooperation as advantageous for both countries. The German newspaper *Linke Zeitung* (in English “Leftist Paper”) even declared that the strategic partnership between Beijing and Berlin would have achieved a higher degree of political relevance than the pact between America and Germany as of 2017 at least (*ibid.*: 11). This was not true, but the statement expressed for easily comprehensible reasons the desire of both the left-leaning newspaper and the communist Chinese government. As a collaboration between both Eurasian powers could result in advantages for both sides, Beijing was very interested in expanding its partnership with Berlin into a full-blown pact. But Chinese

politicians knew that Germany's obligations as a member of the trans-Atlantic network prevented such development from happening (Cunha, 2017: 16). Alberto Cunha (*ibid.*) even asked: could the partnership between America and Germany be superseded by the one between China and Germany in terms of political importance? Would the United States act against this development? Both questions were answered in the study.

China's long-term plan was to introduce a mix of diverse currencies to replace the US Dollar as only global reserve currency. This ambitious endeavor included both the German-backed Euro and the Chinese Yuan (Staaack, 2018: 45). Beijing was also strongly interested in making Germany participate in its strategic One Belt, One Road infrastructure project (OBOR), possessing a value of US Dollar 900 billion. This way, China could project its influence with Berlin's help across entire Eurasia: by creating sea and overland connectivity. While the German administration appeared initially not to be interested, Berlin's political attitude signaled support after 2015 (Ehret, 2019: 3).

Academic scholars perceived the Chinese–German political relations as improving. Will a future Germany be able to choose between America and China to protect its diverse interests? (Farnell and Crookes, 2016: 218) Germany was the 3rd most cited country in the party-owned Chinese English-language newspaper *China Daily*. Furthermore, the newspaper mentioned Germany mostly in a positive connotation (Puglisi, 2017: 305). Galimzyanova (2019: 5) stated that the relations between both Eurasian partners were not only already friendly but even becoming better. The academic consensus in the year 2018 would probably have supported a similar conclusion (Ehret, 2019: 4). But the good relations would not last.

From China's position was Germany a preferred strategic partner for long-term collaboration. A conflict between Washington and Beijing

was from the Chinese perspective inevitable. China had potential border disputes with India, Russia and Japan. In some Muslim countries existed anti-Chinese animosity due to the perceived conditions of the Muslim community in China's Xinjiang province. With Germany, Beijing had no comparative problems. Instead, a cooperation with Germany offered Beijing plenty of gains while facing low risks at the same time.

Economic cooperation was at the core of Chinese–German political relations. Plenty of examples delivered evidence for the width of the collaboration. China and Germany teamed up to coordinate measures against trade surplus penalties (Farnell and Crookes, 2016: 90). Despite American concerns (*ibid.*: 204) did Germany participate in 2015 as one of 57 countries in the creation of China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (*ibid.*: 54; Feng, He and Li: 2019: 102). Berlin might be able to conduct future trade deals in Chinese Renminbi (Zhang, 2016: 60). The US could retaliate by forcing European Union countries to observe mandatory trade hurdles for the China trade. Washington could also use punitive measures to weaken Germany in terms of trade – rendering Berlin less useful as an economic partner of Beijing.

Both Eurasian partners invested heavily into the economy of the other nation. Because German companies perceived the Chinese market despite hurdles as promising, 5,000 German businesses operated there in 2018. But Germany also received as one of the major target markets plenty of investment from China (Amendolagine, Amighini and Rabellotti, 2017: 235). The agriculture, automotive, communications, energy, foods, IT, machine construction, and real estate sectors were from Beijing's perspective important (Ehret, 2019: 3). In 2016, 1,300 Chinese businesses were active in Germany. Self-reported German management experiences were usually positive. Chinese cash influx could until 2030 even increase by factor three (*ibid.*). The cooperation benefitted both sides. Germany was put in a position, in which its

economy could achieve long-term growth. Beijing would be able to access German know-how: with a special focus on the sectors automation, digitization, IT, robotics, and space travel (*ibid.*: 3-4). Under the umbrella term of *Industrie 4.0* were both nations engaged to push a 4th industrial revolution forward (Corrocher, Mavilia and Giorgio, 2020: 433). Access to latest German innovation could also help China to make its 2025 plan “Made in China” come true (Ehret, 2019: 4). Already in the early 20th century, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, did Germany provide technical access that helped China significantly to modernise the own nation.

How American and German interests are divided when it comes to dealing with China, became evident in the case of Huawei. Washington banned the telecommunications expansion plans of the Chinese tech giant in North America, but Berlin did not share the same concerns (Kostecka-Tomaszewska and Krukowska, 2020: 281). Germany introduced stricter security measures – but did not block the phone technology from entering the German market. Security-wise, Germans rated in April 2021 Huawei’s 5G networks as being on the same threat level as similar American networks (*Global Times*, 25th April 2021). US businesses were losing ground in Europe – not only when they were competing against Chinese smartphone providers, but also against Chinese high-speed rail technology (Kostecka-Tomaszewska and Krukowska, 2020: 281). Europe and Germany had turned into a battleground on which America and China were fighting for economic advantages – causing political consequences.

As of late, conflict potential was emerging in the Chinese–German relations. While the strategic partnership still existed, the bilateral relationship was worsening since 2019. Currently, relations between both Eurasian states were still good – the strategic partnership was still existent. But especially the years 2019, 2021 and 2022 could be

perceived as benchmark years indicating a decline in bilateral relations. Chinese investments were since 2017 perceived as more critical than positive (Barkin, 2020). The German administration also checked bilateral business mergers more and more when sensitive German technology was involved. As a result, cash influx began to decline since 2018. China was increasingly also perceived as a business competitor (Shi, 2021: 52, 71). More bilateral conflict potential would surface in the years to come.

China was since 2019 perceived as a “systemic rival and competitor” by the European Union commission (*Politico*, 10th September 2020). This statement could have indicated an important turning point in bilateral Chinese–German political relations: as it also mirrored Berlin’s point of view. In 2020, German foreign minister Heiko Maas criticised China for threatening a Czech politician who had travelled to Taiwan. This incident indicated a new, worsening quality in bilateral relations (*ibid.*). China also became more and more capable of producing elaborate products – what threatened the German export concept which was based on the same premise (*ibid.*). Members of the German Green party, advocating self-declared moral principles, openly spoke against Beijing’s treatment of the Muslim minority in the Chinese Xinjiang province. The Green party demanded a stronger emphasis on upholding human rights when dealing with China (*ibid.*). As the Green party joined a German government coalition as a result of the federal elections in September 2021, its positions increasingly influenced and shaped German foreign policy. This was especially evident, since Annalena Baerbock, in 2021 chancellor candidate for the Green party, had become German foreign minister. Already before the elections did Baerbock advocate a tougher stance against China. During the Taiwan tensions in August 2022, in the context of US politician Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taipei, Baerbock even warned China, Germany’s largest trade

partner, of serious consequences in the case of military action against Taiwan (*Deutsche Welle*, 5th August 2022). Moreover, the German education ministry was also focused on diminishing the impact of China-financed Confucius Institutes in Germany (*South China Morning Post*, 3rd July 2021). The European Union forced for the first time in over twenty years sanctions onto China in March 2021. Reason was the perceived situation of members of the Muslim minority in China's Xinjiang province. Beijing responded by imposing sanctions against politicians of the European Parliament (*Deutsche Welle*, 28th April 2021). More importantly, the approval process of an investment arrangement between Beijing and Brussels was put on hold. Policy makers from both sides had been working on this agreement for seven years. Moreover, the trade arrangement would have been especially advantageous for Germany. From the German point of view, there were mounting concerns (*ibid.*). The relationship between Beijing and Brussels seemed to be deteriorating. The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 made things only worse.

A variety of academic articles already focused on the increasing conflict potential. Whitten *et al.* (2020: 1) foresaw that the economic relationship could suffer as a result of a deteriorating political relationship. The concern turned out to be true. As political tensions mounted, the trade flow between China and Germany suffered. German public opinion during times of the COVID-19 pandemic expressed an anti-Chinese sentiment. Germans were against a coordination of Chinese and German foreign policies. Moreover, China was viewed less favorably than America or even Putin's Russia (Rühlig *et al.*, 2020). Due to China's increased military might and lack of democratic institutions, 60 per cent of all Germans citizens arrived at an opinion towards Beijing, that was at least negative (*ibid.*). The Polish scholars Kostecka-Tomaszewska and Krukowska (2020: 272, 287) saw Beijing utilising its

OBOR project to extent its power into Europe: at Washington's expense. Both academicians recommended common economic measures combining the power of the European Union and the United States to counterbalance Beijing's influence. The scholars were under the impression that American dominance would benefit the European Union countries more than Chinese hegemony. The pro-American stance of the two authors came to no surprise: given that in the Polish academic mainstream, Beijing's partner Russia was perceived as enemy, and Germany as a long-lasting antagonist. Warsaw followed throughout the early 21st century in a political sense Washington's directives and guidelines from the other side of the Atlantic. But why were German citizens worried about China? Germans were concerned about the military power of a faraway country in another continent – which had not been at war for over forty years. Moreover, the United States outspent China by far in terms of military budgeting (*CIA World Factbook*, 2022). Furthermore, was China automatically a rival of Germany – simply because its economic manufacturing capacities had improved so much? Also, human rights aspects influenced German investment considerations – although such issues did practically and directly not touch Berlin's interests. There was no deep structural foundation for bilateral conflict potential. Yet, the evolution of this conflict potential could determine the nature of the bilateral strategic partnership – and whether both Eurasian nations would be close allies or not.

Academic scholars (Oxford Analytica, 2022b: 9) already believed that the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War, triggered by Beijing's partners in Moscow, had a negative impact for Chinese–German relations. The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in August 2022 and April 2023 led to a further deterioration of the bilateral relations. Foreign minister Annalena Baerbock openly threatened Beijing with grave consequences, should

China use military force against Taiwan (*Deutsche Welle*, 5th August 2022). In the aftermath of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in November 2022, when German chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Beijing, Baerbock dared to heavily criticise him for his journey to China. The new German administration with the Green party attested primacy to political over economic values (Oxford Analytica, 2022a: 4). Baerbock did not only want to take a tougher stance against Russia, but also against other countries with not democratically elected leadership (*Politico*, 10th September 2020): including China.

The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis from 2022 and 2023 foreshadowed a hypothetical, major military escalation in the Taiwan Strait. Furthermore, such an escalation was not expected to occur before 2025, when Donald Trump would likely be US president again (*South China Morning Post*, 30th January 2023; *Insider*, 29th January 2023). However, such a hypothetical event would have a significant impact on Germany's economy, outweighing even the impact of the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War. If Germany would cut its business ties with China as a consequence, it would lose its largest export market (Cafruny and Fouskas, 2023). Moreover, Volkswagen's economic viability itself would be at stake due to its dependence on the Chinese market (Volkswagen Group, 2022). Volkswagen (VW) was not only Germany's leading car manufacturer, but the automotive industry was also the key sector of the entire German economy. Also, advanced Chinese access to German technology could essentially be prevented. By extension, the once intended stronger economic cooperation between Brussels and Beijing could not happen (Oxford Analytica, 2022a: 4). If political relations between China and Germany would decline, economic relations would likely deteriorate as well (Ehret, 2019: 15).

Due to the recent and potentially ongoing nature of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, academic scholars should follow

up on examining the evolution of Chinese–German bilateral relations in a broader temporal scope. For China, the stakes were high. Beijing’s relationship with Berlin possessed the potential to decisively influence if China would be the next dominating world power or not. The alignment between Berlin and Washington, as indicated in the Crisis, would probably affect Chinese–German relations negatively. The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023, and its aftermath, could essentially contribute to a stronger partnership between America and Germany: while the one between China and Germany would politically decline.

3. Media Content Analysis: Methodology

A media content analysis was conducted by selecting articles from two German online media publication formats. The used formats were the left-leaning weekly *Der Spiegel*, one of Germany’s intellectually most impactful weeklies, and the more conservative daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, which was the leading non-tabloid daily in the country. Both formats were chosen to represent relevance, diversity and consistency when comparing to a previous study. The keywords used for the search were *Deutsch* (the German word for German), *China* (also the German word for China) and *Partner* (what is not only the German word for partner, but also forms part of the word *Partnerschaft*: the German word for partnership). The chosen time period were the first nine months of the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War, from 24th February 2022, until 23rd November 2022: as Chinese–German relations were seriously affected by the War in Europe – and as the War prepared the further decline of Chinese–German relations during the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis and in its aftermath. Alternatively focusing on only the 12 days in August 2022 and the 3 days in April 2023, while the Crisis lasted

as of 2022 and 2023, would have made only very limited sense. The keyword search was a follow-up to a media content analysis, which had been conducted in the same context for the years 2013 to 2018 by Ehret (2019: 4-5). The previous analysis had used the same keywords and the same online publication formats. Ehret (2019: 14) had already called for a temporal extension of the existing media content analysis.

The researcher conducted a context coding for 24 articles which were retrieved as a result of the keyword search. The articles covered a variety of themes. Mentions of actors and authorities in China were grouped into one of the three categories: positive, neutral, and negative reporting tendencies. The reporting tendency was identified according to the news outlet's perceived impact of Chinese actors' plans and actions on Germany economically and politically – and whether plans and actions were from the applied moral standards of the German journalists desirable or undesirable. In that regard, reporting tendencies could be perceived as rather positive or as rather negative. If no clear preference in the above context could be determined, the reporting tendency was judged as being neutral. Each of the three categories was distinguished from the others by using a distinctive colour. Such an approach can obviously not be totally objective. The researcher's own bias may have been present. Yet, as the same strict standards were applied as for a previous publication of the researcher before (*ibid.*: 4-5), the researcher believed that the results fulfilled standards of verisimilitude: and are therefore useful.

For the purpose of verifying findings in form of an academic discussion, the researcher conducted an unstructured interview with a media expert on the results from the media content analysis. The expert held a PhD in media studies. His knowledge on *Der Spiegel* and the *FAZ* was assessed. Furthermore, his evaluation of the researcher's methods and findings, resulting from the media content analysis, was required.

4. Media Content Analysis and Findings: Chinese–German Relations

Purpose of the new keyword search was to understand how the binational and already existing strategic partnership had developed during the time of the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War: what included the much more limited temporal scope of the initial Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022. The newly retrieved findings also offered the possibility of comparison to the older results in terms of political reporting tendency. The current results were shown in reverse chronological order with the youngest articles on top and the oldest entries at the bottom.

Using the online presence of *Der Spiegel*, the search was conducted in the three sections *DER SPIEGEL*, *SPIEGEL+* and *SPIEGEL International*. In total of 24 articles were found, mentioning Chinese–German relations. Of the 24 articles, four mentioned China in a neutral context, 20 in a rather negative context. The mentions were more neutral in the beginning of the time period and turned out to become more negative, the longer the War lasted. Late articles were only negatively framed. Neutral mentions referred to China as a producer of Covid-19 protections masks, a BRICS member, and an evacuation of Chinese students from war-torn Ukraine. Negative mentions of China were often related to the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War. China was criticised for not supporting sanctions against Russia, still supporting Russia to a certain extent even during times of war, following the wording of the Kremlin and calling the war a “military operation” only. China was also not seen as Germany’s partner anymore when Berlin was dealing with Russia, and as a less important Asian partner than in the past. Moreover, China was called a “systemic rival”, a “torture state”, a “hegemonial power” with aspirations of “dominance”, a nation that was negatively influencing the German education system, the Global South,

and which was a challenge for NATO. Beijing was also criticised for the perceived treatment of the Muslim Uyghur community in its Xinjiang province – and for perceived human rights violations. Commentators furthermore believed that Germany had economically tied itself too much to China. Especially German chancellor Scholz’s November 2022 China visit, in the aftermath of the initial Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022, was repeatedly subject of criticism. It can be summed up that China’s association with Putin’s Russia reflected negative on the East Asian power. In a comparison with the previous media content analysis covering the years 2013 until 2018, for which 50 per cent of all analyzed *Der Spiegel* articles had a rather negative tendency of reporting on China, now during the first nine months of the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War, 83.33 per cent of all articles showed such rather negative tendency. Was the political collaboration between China and Germany in the past perceived as positive (*ibid.*: 4), as in the context of the Syria conflict, no such perception existed for the binational cooperation of both Eurasian partners in the 2022 East European conflict. Economic collaboration between China and Germany, crucial for the relationship, was in the analyzed *Der Spiegel* articles from 2022 not often mentioned.

The above keyword search was for the same time period from 24th February 2022, until 23rd November 2022, also conducted on the website of the *FAZ*. Eighteen results were found, mentioning Chinese–German relations, using the same keywords as for the search on the online platform of *Der Spiegel*. Of the 18 articles, five mentioned China in a neutral context, 13 in a rather negative context. At first glance, this outcome seemed to be an odd finding. Should a daily not have significantly more articles than a weekly? But there were two explanations. Articles in *Der Spiegel* were content-wise usually much longer, going more into detail and containing more in-depth analysis.

This circumstance increased, not decreased, the possibility of referencing the binational partnership. Furthermore, such articles were not necessarily material for breaking news to be published very often in a daily like the *FAZ*, but such articles were published occasionally – being a better fit for a weekly like *Der Spiegel*. That more mentions in the study context could be retrieved from *Der Spiegel* instead of from the *FAZ* fell in line with the observations from the study conducted by Ehret (2019: 1) and provided a further indicator of consistency.

While the negative reporting tendency was predominant in general, the mentions in the *FAZ* turned over time out to become slightly more negative than in the beginning of the time period: but the degree of negative framing did not increase to the same extent as in the *Der Spiegel* publications. Neutral mentions referred to China as a source of Lithium, a potential market for German Bundesliga football matches, an important partner for cooperation that Berlin should deal pragmatically with, and as a country that Germany and France would have different positions towards to. Negative mentions of China stressed that Germany was too dependent on China, that China was a “rival”, a “threat”, a country that was expanding its power, that Germany enabled China’s means of “repression”. As in *Der Spiegel*, chancellor Scholz’s visit to Beijing in the aftermath of the initial events of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 was repeatedly the focus of partly extensive criticism. It was notable that also Washington’s political position towards Beijing was highlighted – as if German and American interests were identical. Economic collaboration between China and Germany occupied a much more important position in the *FAZ* articles than in the articles from *Der Spiegel*. In a comparison with the previous media content analysis covering the years 2013 until 2018, for which 20 per cent of all analyzed *FAZ* articles had a rather negative tendency of reporting on China, now

during the first nine months of the 2022 Russo–Ukrainian War, 72.22 per cent of all articles showed such rather negative tendency: what was a strong increase.

In comparison, articles in *Der Spiegel* were more critical, and used to some extent harsher formulations, than articles in the *FAZ*. This fact may appear as surprising, given that the *FAZ* had a more conservative orientation than the more left-leaning *Der Spiegel*. The stronger degree of criticism of *Der Spiegel* against the communist government of China might be explained from its stronger ideological position, whereby the *FAZ* was rather more pragmatically oriented. The increasingly negative perception of China in both publication formats, and from a German perspective, fell in line with and confirmed the results from the literature review.

The increasingly negative reporting tendency on Chinese–German relations in *Der Spiegel* and the *FAZ* is expected to be mirrored by the release of Germany’s inaugural National Security Strategy in 2023, in the wake of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis. This significant document, supposed to be unveiled by the German Federal Foreign Office in 2023, is likely to illustrate an emerging ambivalence in Germany’s political approach to its principal trade partner in that year (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 3rd January 2023). The strategy document is expected to mostly characterize China’s foreign policy endeavors in an adverse manner. Such a shift in Germany’s official stance could be attributed to the influence of American foreign policy, echoing US emphasis on a self-declared “rules-based international order” (*ibid.*). Such a version of this strategy paper would enable an interpretation of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis as a pivotal occurrence, signaling an ongoing deterioration in the political-economic relations between China and Germany.

5. Discussion on Media Content Analysis: Chinese–German Relations

The findings of the media content analysis were debated with an expert on media studies and sociology, located in Pfaffenhofen in Bavaria, Germany. An unstructured interview was conducted with the expert. The interviewee was 55 years of age and working for a German broadcasting organization at the interview time. Moreover, the study participant was male and held a PhD in media studies and sociology. His age and educational background both supported an understanding of the media content analysis. Additionally, the subject specialized in analyzing diverse media formats. The unstructured interview gave him important information on the two different German media outlets *Der Spiegel* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, as well as on their political reporting tendency in the study context. The interview was necessary as an introduction to the specific topic. The interviewee understood both the topic and the interview questions comprehensively and with ease.

The study participant answered all interview questions during the interview. These interview questions aimed at gathering personal background information of the expert, assessing his knowledge on the two German media publication formats, and asking for the interviewee's evaluation of the media content analysis results, and of the research methods. The expert had to decide to what extent he agreed with the researcher's findings and methods. The academic debate showed that the study participant was already familiar with both German media outlets prior to the study, but the interview increased his knowledge and made him very familiar with both *Der Spiegel* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Furthermore, the expert believed that the political reporting tendency of *Der Spiegel*, when covering Chinese–German political relations during the first nine months of the Russo–Ukrainian War of

2022, was very negative. Also, the reporting tendency on the above relations in 2022 was according to the interviewee different from the coverage of the same relations from 2013 to 2018, as it had turned more negative than before. The subject judged the degree of realism in the coverage of the above relations as unrealistic, with a tendency towards being very unrealistic.

The study participant assessed the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in the above context similarly to *Der Spiegel*, but with slight deviations. Moreover, the expert believed that the political reporting tendency of the *FAZ*, when covering Chinese–German political relations during the first nine months of the Russo–Ukrainian War of 2022, was negative, but not as negative as in the case of *Der Spiegel*. When it comes to the reporting tendency on the above relations in 2022 comparing to the coverage of the same relations from 2013 to 2018, it had turned much more negative than before – indicating an even stronger worsening of the reporting tendency than in the comparative case of *Der Spiegel*. However, the subject judged the degree of realism in the coverage of the above relations as unrealistic just as in the case of *Der Spiegel*, but unlike *Der Spiegel* with the opposite tendency towards being neutral.

Both the methodological approach of comparing a weekly such as *Der Spiegel* with a daily such as the *FAZ*, and the choice of keywords used for the media content analysis, were strongly approved as being very useful by the expert. Also, the interviewee agreed that the number of reviewed articles of both media outlets, the chosen time period, and the context coding into three categories used for the media content analysis were useful in the study context. Overall, the interview confirmed the findings of the study sufficiently.

6. Conclusion

Conducting a media content analysis on the bilateral relations, using context coding, proved to be useful to understand the long-term impact of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in 2022 and 2023 on Chinese–German relations. It became evident that German media coverage of the above political relations, and for the selected news outlets, was to some extent aligned with the changing stance of the German government towards Beijing: which became more critical. An unstructured interview with an expert on media studies and sociology confirmed essentially the findings of the media content analysis in form of an academic discussion. The theoretical implication is that reporting tendencies of Western news outlets need to be more critically scrutinized. American–German relations strongly impacted the relations between both Eurasian powers. Tensions in the American–German relations surfaced stronger during Trump’s reign and indicated an underlying conflict. America and Germany functioned as competitors over the role of the leading Western power. The conflict could likely be resolved in the next years to come – also in conjunction with a major military escalation in the Taiwan Strait: with an essential and final weakening of Germany, which would probably be of an economic nature. Another Trump administration could deliver this outcome. Germany’s best chance to secure its interests would be in an alliance with China and Russia. Despite alternative options, and due to Germany’s essential loss of national identity, the German political establishment would likely accept the final, detrimental impact of the intra-Western conflict for Germany. Future Germany would be aligned with America’s interests. As a result, the strategic partnership between Beijing and Berlin would end. Bilateral relations would turn unfriendly. China would not benefit from access to German technology anymore. As a result of also the 2022 and 2023 Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis’s aftermath, America could remain the more

important partner for Germany than China. Control over Europe, the West, and world domination within limitations could be delivered to the United States. America would be unable to dominate China or Russia.

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Notes

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